

Why Don't They Tell Stories Like They Used To?

By Ann-Sargent Wooster

Video art is a hybrid adapting and sharing the aesthetics, content, and history of the visual arts, literature, music, film, and—most recently—the computer. It brings together ideas about how to construct a story and how to structure experience, fragmentation, disjunction, and chance based on avant-garde ideas developed over the last 100 years. Yet for all its historical precedents and for all the varieties of criticism to which it is open, video art has proved opaque not only to its critics but also to its practitioners, who frequently do not understand the origins of the structures they share. In reply to a statement by Frank Gillette at the 1974 Open Circuits Conference, Robert Pincus-Witten said: "It is not a medium to which the humankind you are so conscious of has access; it's an exceptionally inaccessible medium."¹ More than ten years have passed since that time, but a critical model for video has not yet been constructed.

Because it shares the technology and look of broadcast television, video art has been frequently treated as an aberrant outgrowth of that medium. But to see video art primarily in the context of television is to exacerbate the confusion that already surrounds it. A complex mixture of factors explain video art's continuing lack of clarity. Those who scorn television as a mass-culture medium without any redeeming aesthetic or intellectual qualities dismiss video art in the same breath with the *Dukes of Hazard*. To television aficionados, on the other hand, video art is "poor" television not living up to general expectations of the medium because of its comparatively impoverished technol-

ogy. Moreover, they are alienated by its radical, art-for-art's-sake content featuring personal material, abstraction, and disjunctive narrative for its own sake. Television critics generally see video art as using a language totally different from that of broadcast television and outside their province even when video art is broadcast—such as the recent productions of independent video on WNET, New Television, Alive From Off Center and Independent Focus—and do not write about it.

In its early years (1968–74), video art was treated as an outgrowth of the visual arts, largely because many of its practitioners had crossed over from traditional art forms. Furthermore, the early single-channel tapes and multi-channel installations were usually shown in art galleries and museums. Videomakers, such as video's chief polemicist Nam June Paik, contributed to the identification of video with painting and sculpture by asserting that it was the art form of the future: "as collage technique replaced oil paint, so the cathode-ray tube will replace canvas." He added that the synthesizer made it possible to shape the TV screen

as precisely as Leonardo
as freely as Picasso
as colorfully as Renoir
as profoundly as Mondrian
as violently as Pollock and
as lyrically as Jasper Johns²

Although art critics found themselves responsible for writing about video art along with other time- and performance-based art forms in the early seventies, they were never wholly comfortable with any of these mediums. Video,

in contrast to painting and sculpture, demands too much time in viewing. Although the medium has some of the properties of collage and the arrangement of monitors in installations does have certain sculptural properties, video art has less in common with painting and sculpture than it does with film or performance. After condemning video art for being narcissistic and boring, art critics shifted their focus away from video and began to treat it as invisible.

Video artists themselves have contributed to the murkiness of critical discourse. In the early years, artist-generated publications such as *Radical Software*, *Video Art*, *The New Television*, and others abounded with artists' statements on their own work and the nature and potential of the medium. These writings stressed video's capacity for expanding consciousness and enfranchising those disenfranchised by broadcast television. They saw television idealistically: a magic totem capable of generating Marshall McLuhan's Global Village, and in their hands bringing peace on earth. Others, who came to video from kinetic art and Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), celebrated their hands-on involvement with its technology in the *Spaghetti City Video Manual* and other publications. As a group, the early video artists saw video art as a way of reinventing a technological art form with a spiritual aura and rarely placed their work in a historical context, often implying in their writing a lack of connection with previous art forms. As three-quarter-inch color tapes and lower-cost editing systems replaced the early, crude black-and-white portable systems, the

generation that followed the first wave (post-1975) video art produced more high-tech and more tightly constructed work. Because a new generation of polemicists and theoreticians failed to arise in the community to write about the new work, an aura of wordlessness surrounded video art. We are only now beginning to see a change in critical attitudes towards the medium.

Video's lack of continuity with the avant-garde tradition is compounded by the modernist and formalist rhetoric prevalent at video's genesis. Accordingly, an art form should be about itself or only the nature of its materials be discussed, or both. Noel Carroll discussed this problem in his paper on "category exclusivity" at the Symposium on Self-Invented Media—Video, Opera, Photography, and Performance at the Kitchen, Spring 1984. Carroll pointed out that in an attempt to distinguish itself from other art forms, each new medium stressed its uniqueness and denied the influence of other mediums.

Video had not only the difficulty of functionally having no history before 1970 but also the additional burden of being not-film, not-TV, not-theater, and so forth. Although many early video artists such as Shirley Clarke, Ed Emschwiller, Stan VanderBeek, and Doris Chase began as filmmakers, film was the art form video art was most eager to distinguish itself from. Shortly after the publication of Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* in 1970, which clearly delineated the evolution of video from film, film and video were never discussed in the same breath. The concept of category exclusivity, which remained in operation until post-modernism began to chip away at its boundaries, left video without access to its filmic or other pasts and without the benefit of the language that had been developed for describing film.

The Origins of Disjunctive Narrative

Video art is the heir of the new set of assumptions about what constitutes reality that developed in the nineteenth century. This was a time marked by a revolution in consciousness as notions of a hierarchical order as expressed in Renaissance perspective were replaced by a multiplicity of spatial and temporal points of view. The causal or parallel developments in mathematics (especially non-Euclidean geometry and the fourth dimension), physics (Einstein's theory of relativity), psychology, and philosophy, and the invention of new methods of transportation and communication altered the perception of time and space. One of the consequences of these intellectual and technological developments was the shift from an

external, Euclidean, and generally knowable reality to a more private and subjective one.³ The avant-garde and the bourgeois took up opposing positions on consciousness and mimesis. The creators of such bourgeois art forms as realistic painting and sculpture asserted that their works represented *imitatio naturae* and were the true mimetic art forms. Building on the new notions about "reality" derived from science, psychology, literature, and art, the avant-garde argued that their private visions and manipulations of form, color, space, and time imitated the true reality of the self and constituted the true mimesis.

The emphasis on a subjective ordering of the world based on personal logic was inherited by the makers of video art. One of the commonest forms of construction in video art is a form of stream of consciousness in which reality is ordered in strings of successive or interleaved images. Although William James is credited with the invention of the term "stream of consciousness," the present use of the form owes rather to literature, to Laurence Sterne and Édouard Dujardin, as well as to Gustave Flaubert's *style indirect libre*—where the point of view of the speaker constantly shifts and there are abrupt temporal leaps using flashbacks and flashforwards—and, finally to the elaborate four-dimensional web of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which time, action, and meaning, as well as the thoughts and actions of the characters, are treated as temporally fluid. The literary experiments were influenced by Freud's and other psychologists' work on dreams and the unconscious. This approach to reality also asserts the primacy of the individual over the collective structures of society. Its highly personal order and hermetic or solipsistic references limit its legibility to the artist and his or her immediate circle.

The extensive historical antecedents for stream of consciousness and disjunctive narrative are often forgotten. Within the self-contained video community, it often seems as if Nam June Paik is the progenitor of this type of organized chaos. It has actually become the normative structure for all avant-garde mediums and through a trickle-down effect has influenced the structure of broadcast television, especially commercials and music videos.

The introduction of film further complicated the definition of reality. Film maintained the illusion of reproducing reality, but it accomplished this by chopping up nature even more radically than had any of the other inventions. Editing or montage further chopped up reality, but instead of increasing film's

parsing of reality, it became in the hands of mainstream filmmakers a vehicle for synthesis. Peter Bürger has observed that montage is simply the basic technical procedure of filmmaking, but its meaning depends on how it is employed.⁴ Used to interrupt or comment on reality in a way that is designed to startle the viewer and make him or her conscious of the illusionistic portrayal, it serves a disjunctive function; used allegorically—as in Eisenstein's films—it serves a poetic one. Through the conventions of seamless editing or *montage classique* (such as cutting on motion, dissolves, and so forth), mainstream filmmakers subverted the essential disjunctiveness of montage and generated the illusion of continuous reality. Even the flashback—borrowed freely from ideas about the past derived from psychology and literature—became merely another tool for furthering their realistic illusions.

For the avant-garde artist, the so-called reality of film was a burden, something they had to subvert to express an inner vision, and they adopted different strategies to deal with it. One group said if film is a machine-generated art that slices objects and events into sequences, logically it should be used to film machines and people doing machine-like things such as swinging in a trapeze. This is precisely what Hans Richter did in *Ballet Mécanique* (1924). His method of composition—building chains of like or analogous forms—continues to be one of the strategies of abstract film and video. (Richter is also credited with producing the first self-reflexive work because at one point the image of the filmmaker is reflected in a mirrored ball.) The development of abstract film and film-as-object continued with the rotating nonconcentric circles of Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1925) and in the work of Oskar Fischinger and the Link group in Germany before 1933. The heritage of this work can be seen in the structural films of the mid-to-late sixties such as Tony Conrad's *The Flicker*, which deals with retinal response to different stroboscopic conditions; Paul Sharit's *Ray Gun Virus*, *Razor Blades*, and *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*, which involve the optical interaction of color in time; and Michael Snow's *Wavelength* and *La Région Centrale*. Snow describes the latter's machine-oriented making process as, "I only looked in the camera once. The film was made by planning and the machinery itself."

The Dada and Surrealist filmmakers took an adversary relationship to continuity. Wherever possible they attacked naturalism through the use of unexpected scenes, insuring the impossibility

of the reconciliation of their conflicting realities. They saw disjunction as a political act, part of the avant-garde's commitment to reveal the true reality—in this case, the essential disjunctiveness of stream of consciousness tinged with watered-down Freudianism. Yet, they felt no compunction about using film's credibility as a vehicle of reality to make their unexpected metaphors more convincing.

One of the Dadaists' and Surrealists' most significant contributions to avant-garde structure was the emphasis they placed on chance, automatic writing, and other psychic phenomena. The Dadaist Kurt Schwitters and the Dada-Surrealist Marcel Duchamp were pivotal figures in the breakdown of the boundaries between art and life and in the acceptance of new, untraditional art materials—Schwitters through the *Merzbau* and Duchamp through the ready-made. Both were responsible for the opening up of the practice of art that gave rise to the aesthetics of junk; but it was Duchamp who brought the idea of chance to America, where it affected the works of Jackson Pollock, the Fluxus Group, the Judson Dance Theater, the composer John Cage, and, ultimately, video. Paik, who was greatly influenced by Cage, made his first video installation as a neo-Dada assemblage in Wuppertal, Germany, and many of his early TV works were really little more than junk sculptures using a newly available industrial waste.

By 1952, John Cage had moved to the use of chance operations in his work. Although in art circles the primary emphasis is placed on the Duchamp-Cage connection, Cage's theories of aleatory composition are largely derived from Zen Buddhism and the Huang Po Doctrine of the Universal Mind. In his conversations on Zen at Black Mountain College recorded by Francine Du Plessix he stressed nonhierarchical order.

No value judgments are possible because nothing is better than anything else. Art should not be different from life but an act within life. Like all of life, with its accidents and variety and disorder and only momentary beauties.⁶

Cage felt that his "theatrical music paralleled particular reality models."⁷

If you move down the street in the city you can see people are moving with intention but you don't know what these intentions are. Many things happen which can be viewed in a purposeless way; the more things happening the better. If there are only a few ideas the piece produces a kind of concentration which is characteristic of



Fig. 1 Bruce Connor, *A Movie*, 1958

human beings. If there are many things, it produces a kind of chaos characteristic of nature.⁸

Avant-Garde Film and Film Theories of the Fifties and Sixties

Cage's theories and music were among the factors serving to break down the old subjectivity of Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and Existentialism. This cool, brisk new objectivity with its denial of metaphor was heralded as early as 1958 by Robbe-Grillet when he called for the abolishment of subjectivity in the New Novel. Even Pop Art with its celebration of commercial products as icons and Op Art's emphasis on retinal stimulation distanced the art object from personal content. The advent of Minimalism and formalist-modernist criticism completed the cooling process. In a 1956 essay, Rudolph Arnheim announced, "By renouncing portrayal, the work of art establishes itself clearly as an object possessing an independent existence of its own."⁹ Yet, the new objectivity had as its basis the old avant-garde ploy of drawing back the curtain of bourgeois illusionism and revealing the so-called nature of the mind. Sounding like a throwback to the turn of the century, Arnheim describes American independent movies as simultaneously objective and chaotic:

The destruction of time and space is a nightmare when applied to the physical world but it is a sensible order in the realm of the mind. The human mind, in fact stores the experience of the past as memory traces, and in the storage vault

there are no time sequences or spatial dimensions, only affinities and associations based on similarity or contrast.¹⁰

Bruce Connor's *A Movie* (1958) (Fig. 1) fulfills most of the then-current avant-garde dicta about structure and objectivity, ironically using not the materials of life but the most "real" products of the realm of illusions—film and newsreel footage of sex and disasters. Connor's work illustrates how completely film and now television have become part of the substance of our conscious and unconscious, producing work that is self-reflexive of the medium (film about film or television about television), and uses images culled from these sources to describe the artist's emotions. To Ottorino Respighi's *The Pines of Rome*, serious music as much like movie music as possible,¹¹ Connor builds sequences of analogous forms and events such as water-skiing accidents, car crashes, the destruction of the Hindenburg, the hiccuping death of a bridge—chains of images that are designed to comment on and illuminate each other, including the new cliché of porno followed by the explosion of such phallic-shaped forms as blimps and rockets.

Self-reflexivity—art about making art and its own materials—continued throughout the sixties. As Jean-Luc Godard turned from commercial films to avant-garde and political ones, he used the jump-cut to disrupt continuity and other forms of commentary in order to analyze the nature of the film experience. More experimental and abstract filmmakers began to insert blank leader

to create an awareness of the arbitrariness of filmic illusionism. In George Landow's 1966 *Film in Which There Appear Sprocket Holes and Edge Letters* (actually, a loop), the physical nature of film—including accidents and flaws—was celebrated.

Commercial film emphasized illusion, a synthetic construct of condensed time, while the rebellious avant-garde filmmaker often chose to use film in a manner more closely resembling real time. Andy Warhol's fixed-camera-position films, such as *Sleep*, lasting up to eight hours are typical of this way of thinking about film. With the advent of video, Warhol's practice was adopted by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas (Fig. 2), and others with a performance bent. They would turn on the video camera and perform in front of it for the duration of the tape. The composition of the work of art or performance was determined by the length of the tape. But, unlike Warhol, the early videomakers neither used the camera as an objective observer nor clearly separated the filmmaker and subject. In their work they were combined, and the artist performed for the camera, using it as a mirror, a process Rosalind Krauss has aptly called "narcissistic."

The most problematic concept video art inherited from the films of the sixties was the belief in the superior efficacy of the irrational, wordless experience that strives to imitate consciousness. The move towards wordlessness came from certain attitudes and values expressed by Jean Piaget, Buckminster Fuller, Fritz Perls, R.D. Laing, John Lilly, an interest in Eastern religions growing out of the fifties' interest in Zen, and the "oh wow" factor derived from the use of mind-expanding drugs by beatniks and hippies, and the trickle-down effect of the cybernetics revolution, which destroyed existing value systems and hierarchies by rendering most things in the world as pieces of information. In *Expanded Cinema*, a good summation of the beliefs of the preceding decade, Gene Youngblood propounds the virtues of synchronicity. Quoting Ehrenziger, he defines it as, "The child's capacity to analyze a total structure without having to analyze it or choose either/or."¹² The action of the mind was aesthetically objectified, and a succession of images independent of narrative was designed to produce a mind-expanding experience. In Brakhage's films such as *Dog Star Man*, autonomous images are superimposed or compounded not for dramatic effect but, according to the filmmaker, to provide raw material for the viewer's personal psychic experience.

Brakhage places himself in adversary relationship to commercial films and

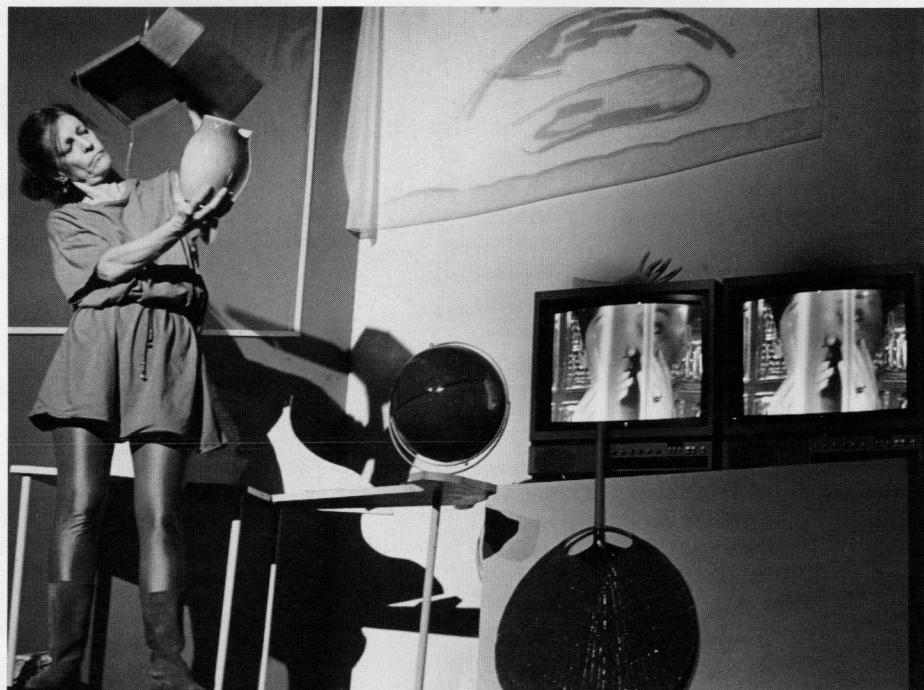


Fig. 2 Joan Jonas performing in *He Saw Her Burning*, March 1983, New American Filmmaker Series (February 22–March 13, 1983), Whitney Museum of American Art.

event art films such as *Last Year at Marienbad*. With a beatnik-hippy élan, he withdraws from capitalistic structures into a private realm. Brakhage gives the viewer the power to join him as a creator, to appropriate and combine his images at will. To a certain extent, Brakhage anticipates recent experiments with computer-assisted storytelling using video discs in which the viewer is permitted to direct the course of the narrative. In films such as *Water Baby Window Moving* (1958) he uses the flashback and flashforward to describe poetically his feelings about the birth of his child, conveying his feeling of joy through wordless images arranged cyclically. In later work he takes a more God's-eye view.

Imagine an eye unruly by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye that must know each object encountered in life through a new adventure in perception. Imagine a world shimmering with an endless variety of movement and gradations of color. Imagine a world before the beginning of the word.¹³

Video art inherited this emphasis on the value of the irrational, wordless experience that strove to imitate consciousness. A mystical experience is by its very nature difficult to transcribe and communicate, but, when it is translated into "art," one is no longer dealing with the immaterial. Because of the commonly held beliefs in the late sixties and

early seventies, the artist had a vested interest in playing Shakespeare's wise fool, concealing his structure behind a total incorporeal effect. Youngblood added a coda to his paean of Brakhage's abstract films: "This is not to suggest a non-objective experience. The images develop their own syntactical meaning and a 'narrative' line is perceived, though the meaning of any given image may change in the context of different sequences."¹⁴

Nam June Paik

A case can be made for locating the starting point of video art with the genesis of television, including Ernie Kovacs's 1952 experiments with distorting the signal, or, for the distribution of its origins, to a variety of European and American figures and movements, but if one person is given credit, it is usually the Korean-American artist and musician Nam June Paik. Coming to video as an avant-garde musician, under the influence of John Cage, George Maciunas, and the Fluxus Group, he saw television with its lowbrow reputation as the perfect material *pour épater le bourgeois*. He first used television sets as altered ready-mades and, in *The Moon is the Oldest TV* and other works, as self-referential machines capable of generating images from their own mechanisms—part of the then-current, modernist rhetoric about making work about itself. His experiments with feedback paralleled the art world's interest in process and materials. This work led him to develop the colorizer/synthesizer

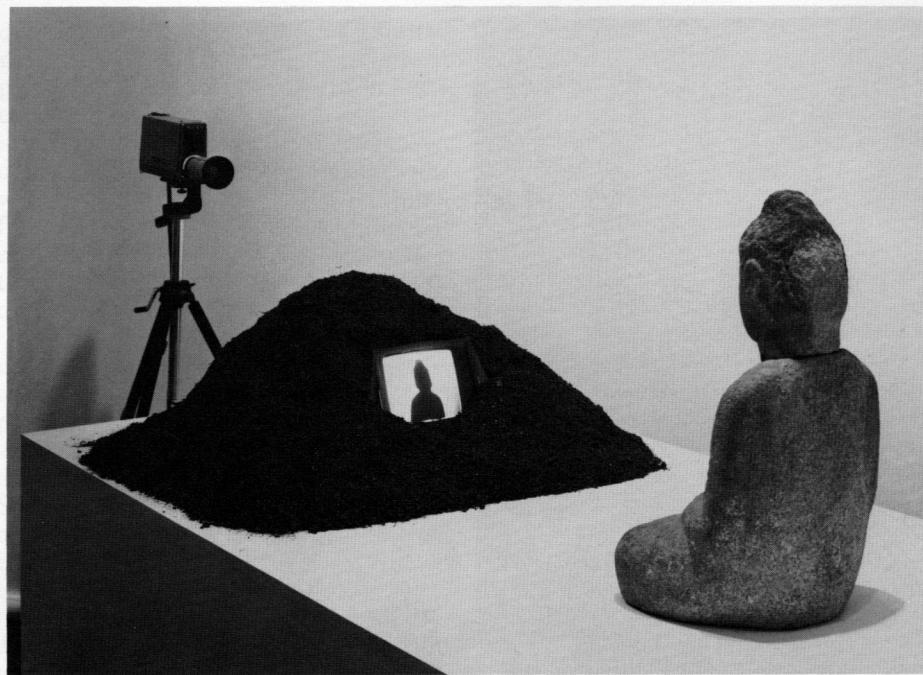


Fig. 3 Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, 1974, Buddha statue, video camera, and television, with mound of earth, exhibition installation, *Nam June Paik* (April 30–June 27, 1982), Whitney Museum of American Art. Statue: Collection Asian Gallery, New York; camera and television: Collection of the artist.

with Shuya Abe. The Paik-Abe synthesizer—along with those simultaneously invented by Stephen Beck, Peter Campus, Bill and Louise Etra, James Seawright, Eric Siegel, Aldo Tambellini, Stan VanderBeek, and Walter Wright—with its capacity for producing Fauve colors and electronically induced stacks of bleeding osmotic forms led to the separate genre of image-processed work. His video sculptures, *TV Bra*, *TV Bed*, *TV Cello*, and *TV Buddha* (Fig. 3), and performances with Charlotte Moorman introduced performance video, video sculpture, and video installations.

None of Paik's structures were entirely new. They blended Fluxus performance, Cage's ideas about music and art, and stream of consciousness derived from literature and film. Paik's single-channel tapes established the norm for the abstract visual language used in video. Although more edited than the work of his peers in the early seventies, Paik's personal and intuitive structures had become the norm by the decade's end. His methods are best seen in *Global Groove* (1973). Here we find a fully realized form of his use of intensely visual, chaotic stream-of-consciousness montage. Its presence here serves a didactic purpose, allowing Paik to provide his interpretation and visual exposition of McLuhan's remarks on television's effect of creating global unity, the idealistic "global village" many early videomakers sought. In one typical sequence, Paik juxtaposed Allen Ginsberg's chanting in the East Village with Korean dancers (to demonstrate the

diversity of the world) and Pepsi commercials in Japanese (to illustrate its homogenization). Paik wanted to "heat up" McLuhan's "cool" medium. He did this by imitating the structures of television—the short abrupt units of plot interrupted by brisk commercials—and then did television one better by accelerating the tempo, overlapping the units, and then enhancing them through electronic manipulation or the application of exotic color. The final product was essentially alien to broadcast television, on which it appeared. It had the appearance of wily analysis and a pastiche made by someone who did not understand, or appeared not to understand, the language and bourgeois reality of broadcast television. The appearance of misunderstanding or misreading television was increased by what seemed to be nervous and random channel switching. The style Paik chose for his presentation of global consciousness was a collage of disparate parts, like the layered images of Rauschenberg's prints. His editing had a brusque choppy quality—part play and part didacticism—that owed more to Warhol's "performance" films or to Godard's use of the jump-cut to disrupt a scene than to Hollywood *montage classique*. With modifications and embellishments, Paik's methodology has since become standard practice for most of video art including "new narrative."

The Structure of Video

Video art has been plagued by its legacy of wordlessness. Viewers often see its flowing images and unfamiliar circum-

stances as pure kinesis, visual candy, confusing it with television and imposing other limiting ideas that deny its content. Artists have intensified this problem by adopting stream of consciousness and disjunctive or abstract narrative as the standard structure in their work, often at the expense of legibility. The historical precedents for these devices are based on commonly held concepts about how the brain functions. In adopting this model, artists have not distinguished between the creator's and the viewer's perception and have not adequately taken into account the different sources of information available to maker and viewer. The maker has access to storyboards and other plotting devices, as well as a familiarity with the material, whereas the viewer usually has only the rapidly moving stream of images that appear before his or her eyes. By now, most of us have had Bill Viola's "seven-channel childhood" and have internalized broadcast television's essential disjunctiveness with its standard fare of short fragments of story interrupted by commercials, themselves subdivided into small units.

Although a career as a television watcher—a passive and unanalytical activity, at best—may familiarize one with watching speeding images and responding to them subliminally, it does not equip one for a sophisticated reading of images that are nonnarrative or not product oriented. Shalom Gorewitz's *U.S. Sweat* (Fig. 4) suffers from the difference between the maker's intentions and the viewer's expectation. The tape was originally commissioned by the U.S.A. Cable Network as its nightly sign-off, but it goes beyond the usual montage of the good life that is typical of that genre and allegorically traces the demographic shift from the rural south to the urban north and the tensions and conflicts it induced. In its ambitions *U.S. Sweat*'s nonverbal montage resembles Stevie Wonder's talking narratives such as "A Boy Is Born," with further elaborations on content being supplied by an expressionist use of color, sound, and electronic image processing. Because of the subtlety and intricacy of the patterning of its images and limited viewer expectation, the nuances of Gorewitz's artistry are lost and the tape is perceived as merely a mildly disturbing travelogue.

One of the problems in interpreting and making video art is that the medium does not have the clearly defined structures or categories found in music, poetry, painting, and sculpture. This is owing in part to the relative newness of the medium; but, even when a series of conventions is established it is often rendered obsolete or superseded by rapidly

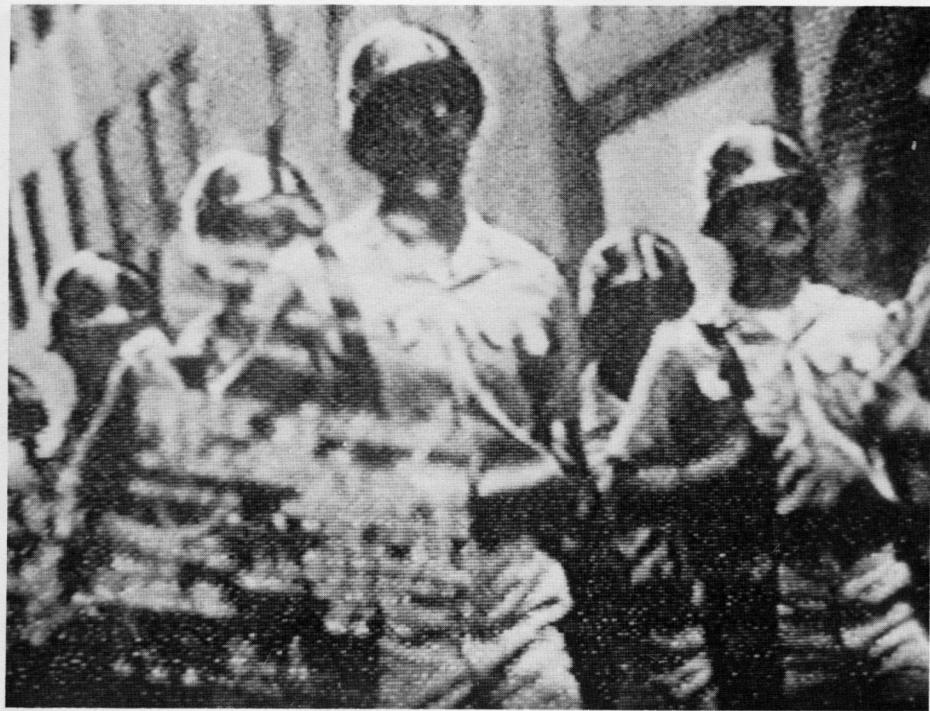


Fig. 4 Shalom Gorewitz, *U.S. Sweat*, 1982, videotape.

changing shifts in technology. As editing systems and color became affordable, they replaced the early minimally edited black-and-white work. Three-quarter-inch analog-edited color tapes have been replaced by computerized editing and special effects, one-inch masters, and \$40,000 three-tube color cameras. Through their exhibition and funding procedures, museums, festivals, and grant-giving agencies have encouraged high-tech, high-budget work at the expense of low-tech work, which has proved counterproductive to the growth of the medium. Works that employ varying levels of technology appear very different from one another—far different from, for example, a sculpture done in clay from one in bronze—and that difference in appearance has served at times to alienate the practitioners of the same medium from one another by masking the similarities of their work.

The early and often inaccurate interpretation of video art as kinetic painting has diminished through the years. Videomakers today are more likely to compare their work to poetry or music, referring to its imagist or metaphoric content with subsidiary references to its abstract and often rhythmic structure. The amorphous designation of materials as being like a poem or music raises more questions than it answers, but it is a good starting point for understanding the tacit assumptions that underlie video art and for learning to read videotapes.

If a videotape is a poem, what kind of poem is it: Haiku, free verse, a sonnet, a street chant? Or simply a collection of images, a bouquet of pretty pictures? If a videotape is like language, what is the

equivalent of the smallest unit, the word? And what constitutes the sentence? Eisenstein has said of film that the shot is the montage cell. The shot, the space between the edits or the mise-en-scène, can be construed as a single word or a cluster of words. It can also be a trope such as Homer's recurring phrase "wine-dark sea" or the ant-filled hand in Dali and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, which simultaneously illustrates the idiomatic expression "hands in the hand," meaning the hand is asleep, and suggests decay. Although a single picture may not be worth a thousand words, it does short-circuit language, and, as James Monaco has said: "A picture of a book is much closer to a book, conceptually, than the word 'book.'"¹⁵ The picture is modified within a given shot by the presence of other objects or action, compositional shifts in color, and form. These objects and events change the picture from an icon to a symbol.

For a variety of reasons, including budgetary constraints, video images are frequently stripped of references to a specific story or society (its denotative and connotative meanings) and used more purely as an icon or symbol than is common in film and broadcast television. In film, shots are usually combined in a scene, the equivalent of a paragraph or stanza. Video generally eschews narrative conventions such as the reaction shot and the dissolve even when working in a narrative vein. Video tends to see the scene as an extension of the shot, editing to intensify the moment such as in Dara Birnbaum's *Wonder Woman* and *Damnation of Faust*, where fast

edits in the former and complex special effects in the latter magnify experience. The more unitary, building-block approach to the shot can be seen in Barbara Buckner's *The Golden Pictures*, where she gives still-life objects a supernatural intensity through shifts in color, luminance, and voltage.

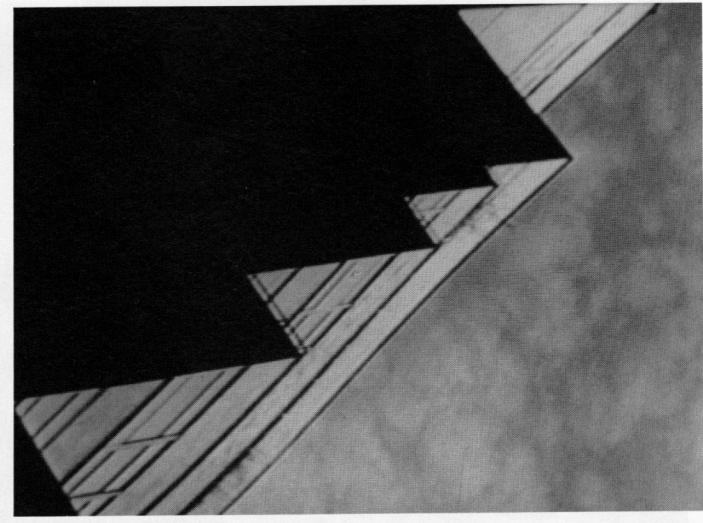
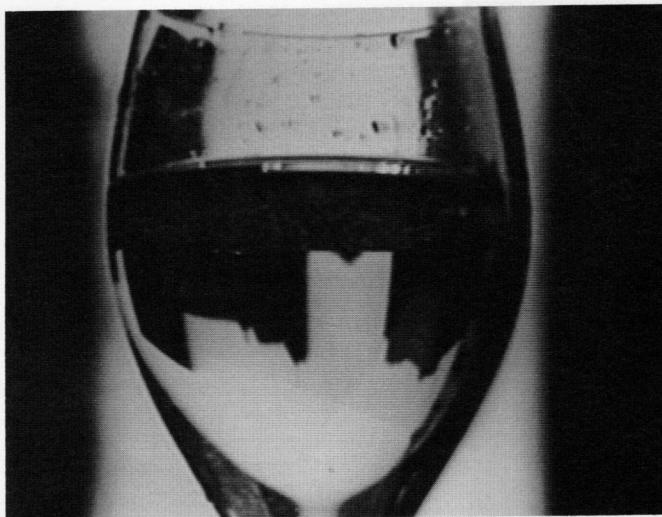
In the absence of narrative, greater weight is given to the effects of propinquity. Meaning is expanded syntagmatically through the modification and interpretation provided by adjacent shots. In Mary Lucier's *Denman's Col (Geometry)* (Figs. 5 and 6) and Bill Viola's *Hatsu Yume* it takes the form of metaphor. In *Denman's Col*, Lucier constructs a book of hours based on New York City architecture seen through the cycle of a year. Exterior shots of buildings are edited with interior shots, often of glasses, teacups, and vases being filled to call attention to the buildings' dual role as facade and container. Viola describes his work as like both poetry and music:

In the visual sense, my works are more related to music than to the printed word. They are visual poems, allegories in the language of subjective perception, open to diverse individual interpretation, yet each thematically expressing specific concepts derived from everyday experience.¹⁶

In *Hatsu Yume*, Viola presents what appears to be a high-tech travelogue of modern Japan contrasting city and country life. Woven throughout are partially buried symbolic references to his principal themes of the opposition and essential unity of fire and water, light and dark, life and death, with the city and man-made structures representing fire. As he explains it:

Video treats light like water—it becomes a fluid on the video tube. I thought water supports the fish like light supports man. Land is the death of fish—Darkness is the death of man.¹⁷

In his *Thinking Eye* series, especially in the recent *Shifters* (Figs. 7, 8, and 9), Juan Downey, operating in an unusual nexus between art history and personal reverie, builds on the expectation of continuity that propinquity gives and defies it through internally or adjacently fracturing or multiplying the object, idea, or story into unusual diptychs and triptychs. As in Medieval typological iconography, visually similar or dissimilar scenes that share a common theme, such as the pyramid of Cheops and the meaning of hearing, are juxtaposed, modifying and muddying the meaning of each.



Figs. 5 and 6 Mary Lucier, *Denman's Col (Geometry)*, 1981, two synchronized videotapes on five monitors in a zigzag wall. Left: image from Channel 1; Right: image from Channel 2.

There are many problems in reading these works. Since video has no given or accepted norm, artists generally invent their own private, idiosyncratic structures. This is further complicated by our inexpertise in reading images or visual symbols, especially when they are divorced from a narrative or advertising context. We can all by now guess at the meaning of selling a car by showing it with a seductive woman or a sleek feline, but what of more subtle metaphors or more complicated allegories? To understand video, one has to grant greater power to images, overcoming the intellectual prejudice against the visual—and invest or reinvest them with meaning. In the case of video it often means naming images for the first time.

If video is like music, what kind of music is it like: German *Lieder*, rock-and-roll, blues, symphonies, operas, or the innovations of twentieth-century avant-garde music where virtually anything goes? When artists declare that they want their work to be read like music, do they mean passively with an unquestioning enjoyment of the rhythm? Or are they inviting the kind of analysis an opera devotee equipped with a libretto gives? When artists describe their work as being like music they are not referring to hearing. No, the musical component in their work lies in the rhythmic arrangement of images or the movement within an image. The description of images as being like music goes back at least to Eisenstein's theory of ocular music, which was based on Baudelaire's and Rimbaud's theory of correspondences as well as on the synaesthetic work of Wagner and Scriabin. Eisenstein also found kinetic-music properties in painting. He felt it was necessary to link the visual and kinetic movement in a *mise-en-scène* to the line or movement of the music. Yet, Eisenstein was not asking images to project

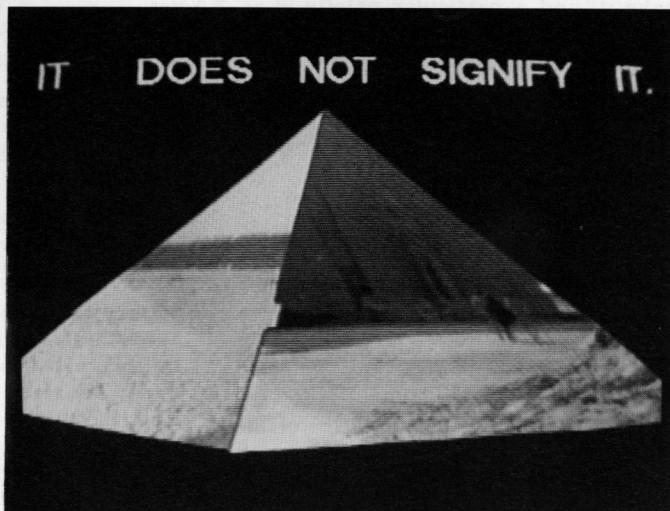
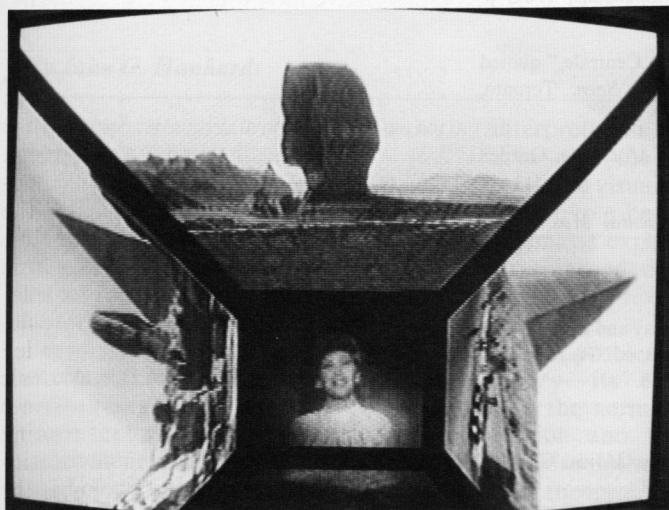
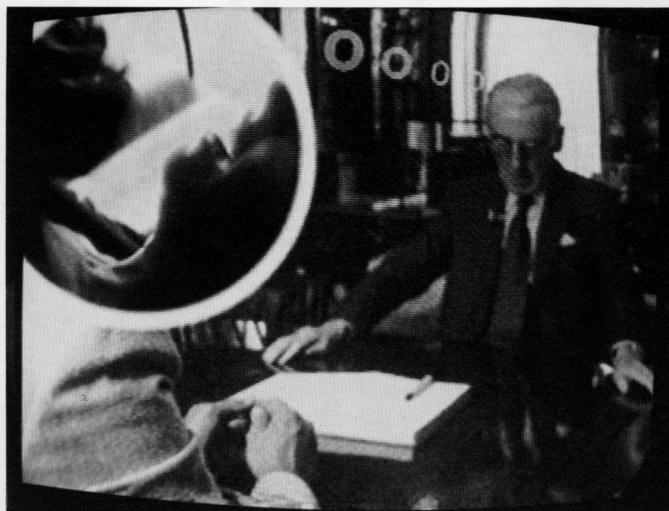
their music without assistance from actual music or a story. He subordinated color, composition, and music to the overall effect of his films. More often in video, when a parity is attempted between music and images, a split occurs because of their essentially different natures.

Sound and images have existed as unequal partners almost from the beginning of video. In the early days, with the exception of the work of Stephen Beck and the Vasulkas, for example, and Paik's experiments using sound to interrupt an image, the emphasis had been on the visual component. This was partly because of the poor quality of the audio equipment available (both recording and playback) and partly because many of the artists came from essentially visual backgrounds and were not as comfortable with sound as they were with images. Images were treated as promiscuous acceptors of sound. When ambient sound was not used the usual practice was to add a piece of music to the sound track. When Shalom Gorewitz provided rock clubs with tapes and gave them permission to use any song they wanted, he discovered that almost any piece of dance music would harmonize with the images if the editing was fast paced enough. (I might add that in his "art" tapes he carefully selects the music to enhance the images.) Recently, there have been some artists, headed by Reynold Weidenaar, who genuinely appreciate the "musicality" of their work and are involved equally in composing images and music.

Another problem in the video-music analogy is the differing degrees of abstraction possible with pictures and music. Images are short-cut signs and always have greater specificity than does music. If pictures are used in an abstract or mathematical structure, as Gary Hill sometimes does in imitation of

certain methods of music composition, they are never as abstract or lyrical as the equivalent music, and, no matter how generalized the images are, one is left with a concrete prosiness like singing the alphabet. Nowhere have the varying degrees of abstraction possible with songs (words), images, and music been more apparent than in the relatively new genre of music video. Music-songs are more abstract and open-ended than a sequence of images. With music video, the listener-viewer is locked into one specific construction of the meaning of its words. Video art's and music video's solution is to use generic types (the perfect young man, the blonde model), anywhere situations, and disjunctive story lines. All these elements combine to give the viewer greater latitude in his or her interpretation of the illustrated music. The use of generic types, which in video art is often accomplished through extreme close-ups and disjunction, works equally well for Roxy Music's *Avalon* and Mary Lucier's *Winter Garden*.

In video art, the musical component derives in part from editing. You may not be able to go away humming the picture but with many works you can hum the pattern of the edits. Video features a substantially different approach to editing from film because of its different physical properties. In film there is a mechanical juxtaposition of discrete parts that are more or less used up in their joining. Because it is electronic and nothing is lost in the editing process, video enjoys a greater conservation of matter. As John Sanborn has pointed out, artists view their material differently knowing that a shot can be interpreted and duplicated through editing, permitting the exponential expansion of a single moment. To a certain extent rhythmic editing is related to the feedback tapes of Steve Reich in which a



Figs. 7, 8, and 9
Juan Downey,
Shifters, 1984,
videotape.

recycled tape supplies a layered, staggered rhythm. Tamiyo Sasaki's stuttering edits of fauna represent a similar but seemingly less mechanistic approach to parsing and multiplying the subject. In Sasaki's work, unlike Reich's where feedback gradually abstracts the words, repeated edits amplify the characteristic patterns of the animals she observed, turning them into robot-like performers. Despite the fact that different types of editing systems account for different styles of juxtaposition, the artist's sense of how to join pictures and the rhythm of his or her edits are as much a signature as is subject matter. So far no language has developed to acknowledge this quality. In the future shall we say that so-and-so's edits have a wild and woolly beat or that they sang like Pavarotti?

The sources for the color content of video art have also been neglected by its critics and practitioners. By this I mean a diversity of uses of color from the color coding of emotional content in Antonioni's *Red Desert*, which has "a precise metonymic use of color, where an overall grey tonality stands for depression and splotches of brilliant color stand for freedom,"¹⁸ to Brian De Palma's use of red-

suffused fields in *Scarface* to stand for blood lust, to the razzle-dazzle chromatatics of image-processed work. There is a long history of the inclusion of color in the palette of the senses, deriving in part from Baudelaire's theory of correspondences and Rimbaud's color alphabet. Color was so important to Eisenstein that he composed a virtual dictionary of the meaning of color, which included references to Havelock Ellis's psychological interpretation of color. Stan Brakhage insisted on the importance of color for shaping meaning in his films:

the comparable light-beeps of eye's out put tend *thru colors* (the order of colors, in rapid flashes), to make the shapes of closed-eye-vision which resolve into the specific details of memory's pictures; but, at first, these multiple colored flashes do smear (for the inattentive) into overwhelming color tones (viz: red for anger, green for jealousy, blue for nostalgic sadness, yellow as basic but also reflective of its psychological cowardly connotation, increasing with fear).¹⁹

Brakhage's description of his use of color in his films is close to the way it is used in image-processed tapes. The colorizer/synthesizer simultaneously allows the fusion of electronic signals from various pieces of tape and the alteration of colors by changes in voltage that affect their saturation and tonality. Image-processed work is the most direct inheritor of the traditions of color symbolism in literature, painting, music, and film. The colorizer/synthesizer guarantees an effect of exoticism to anything it is applied to. Its application automatically converts an image from an icon to a symbol loaded with artist-generated meaning. But, the knowledge of color symbolism has almost gone underground in video. When asked, practitioners of this genre almost always acknowledge the importance of color in their decision-making process, but there have been few statements by artists and critics analyzing its exact operation and no in-depth analysis or even a general awareness of how the use of altered color affects the meaning of specific shots or scenes, such as the blue sheep in Barbara Buckner's *Pictures of the Lost* or Shalom Gorewitz's use of red and muddy maroon to signify factories are bad places in *U.S. Sweat*.

It would be false to think this is a purely machine-based art, generating images mechanistically without the maker's intervention. True, the machine generates the color, and each of the major colorizers offers a slightly different range of hues: the Paik-Abe synthesizer, for example, tends towards almost Day-Glo magentas, greens, and yellows. The movement towards personal colorizers/synthesizers keyed to an individual artist is just beginning, but the present state of affairs is similar to the painter's reliance on brand-name paint. Still, the work that comes out of a specific center, such as the Experimental Television Center, Owego, New York, is as varied as the artists who

make it, and a particular palette is as much a signature as is the rhythm of the edits. Although color is a more overt facet of image-processed work than of other genres of video, it would also be wrong to limit its discussion solely to image-processed work.

The colorizer/synthesizer also affects the appearance of objects, making it possible to layer them in a dense transparent collage, glazing and interpenetrating one another. This translucent stack provides a more immediate and visual way of building metaphoric relationships than does language. It is also possible to break the boundaries of an object, giving it roughly the appearance of a freely drawn line in painting or the bleeding of two colors in a watercolor. In video this suture is more organic than in painting because it occurs electronically and temporally at once, and the objects physically become one substance before one's eyes. The distortions caused by technological pyrotechnics have the same meaning as Expressionist distortions of form—the bean-shaped head in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* and Paik's vortical head in *The Medium Is the Medium* are more alike than are Bernini's *Pluto and Proserpina* and *Kojak*, although the latter pair share an interest in violent pursuit. Recent video work has become conscious of the meaning of the manipulation of form, and one of the attractions of image processing is that its potential for metamorphosis makes it possible to render spiritual and emotional realities both graphically and kinetically.

Christian Metz has written, "When a 'language' does not already exist, one must be something of an artist to speak it, however poorly. For to speak it is partly to invent it, whereas to speak a language of everyday is simply to use it."²⁰ If video ever did represent a wholly new art form, it no longer does. Made up partly of a forgotten or ignored past and partly of certain conventions derived from film, art, television, and its own genesis, video art has a language. The time has come for all of us, makers and viewers, to learn to speak it.

Notes

This article is excerpted from a work in progress on the structure of video art.

- 1 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Open Circuits," an international conference of the aesthetics of television held at The Museum of Modern Art, January 1974.
- 2 Nam June Paik, *Video 'n' Technology*, ed. Judson Rosebush, Syracuse, Everson Museum, 1974.
- 3 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, proposes that the shift was a consequence of the loss of privacy brought on by the new inventions—trains, for example—and the increasingly collective organization of time due to the need for schedules.
- 4 Peter Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 73.
- 5 Michael Snow, "La Région Centrale," quoted in Regina Cornwall, *Snow Seen*, Toronto, 1980, p. 105.
- 6 Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain*, Garden City, N.Y., 1973, p. 369.
- 7 Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music*, New York, 1974, p. 61.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Rudolf Arnheim, "Art Today and the Film," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York, 1967, p. 58.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.
- 11 Gerald Mast, *Film Cinema Movie*, Chicago, 1983, pp. 82–83.
- 12 Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York, 1970, p. 84.
- 13 Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors of Vision," quoted *ibid.*, p. 91.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 James Monaco, *How to Read Film*, New York, 1981, p. 128.
- 16 Bill Viola, artist's statement in "Program Notes," Whitney Museum of American Art, March 16–18, 1982, p. 2.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Monaco (cited n. 15), p. 138.
- 19 Stan Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, ed. Robert Haller, New Paltz, N.Y., 1982, p. 134.
- 20 Christian Metz, quoted in Monaco (cited n. 15), p. 132.

Ann-Sargent Wooster is an artist, critic, and art historian. She teaches art history at the School of Visual Arts and writes for Afterimage, East Village Eye, Art in America, Video Times, and other publications. Her videotape House is currently part of The American Federation of Arts traveling show Revising Romance: New Feminist Video. She is the recipient of a New York State Council of the Arts grant for Video Criticism to write a history of video art.